Book club in a Bag

KALAMAZOO PUBLIC LIBRARY

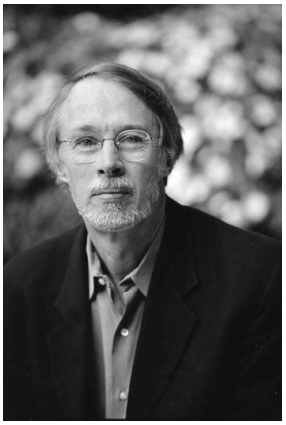
Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
The Feast of Love

Author: Charles Baxter

Family: Born May 13, 1947, in Minneapolis, MN; son of John Thomas and Mary Barber (Eaton) Baxter; married Martha Ann Hauser (a teacher), July 12, 1976; children: Daniel John. Education: Macalester College, B.A., 1969; State University of New York at Buffalo, Ph.D., 1974. Addresses: Home: Minneapolis, MN. Office: Department of English, University of Minnesota, 210G Lind Hall, 207 Church St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455. E-mail: baxte029@umn.edu.

Name: Charles Baxter
Born: May 13, 1947
Education: Macalester College, B.A., 1969; State University of New York at Buffalo, Ph.D., 1974.
Address: Department of English, University of Minnesota, 210G Lind Hall, 207 Church St. SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455.
Email: baxte029@umn.edu.



Career:
High school teacher in Pinconning, MI, 1969-70; Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, assistant professor, 1974-79, associate professor, 1979-85, professor of English, 1985-89; Warren Wilson College, faculty member, beginning 1986; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, visiting faculty member, 1987, professor of English, 1989-99, adjunct professor of creative writing, 1999-2003; University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Edelstein-Keller Senior Fellow in Creative Writing, 2003—.

Awards:
Faculty research fellowship, Wayne State University, 1980-81; Lawrence Foundation Award, 1982, and Associated Writing Programs Award Series in Short Fiction, 1984, both for *Harmony of the World;* National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1983, Michigan Council for the Arts fellowship, 1984; Faculty Recognition Award, Wayne State University, 1985 and 1987; Guggenheim fellowship, 1985-86; Michigan Council of the Arts grant, 1986; Arts Foundation of Michigan Award, 1991; Lawrence Foundation Award, 1991; Reader's Digest Foundation fellowship, 1992; Michigan Author of the Year Award, Michigan Foundation, 1994; Harvard Review Award and O. Henry Prize, both 1995; Award in Literature, American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1997; finalist, National Book Award in Fiction, 2000, for *The Feast of Love*.

Writings:
Chameleon (poetry), illustrated by Mary E. Miner, New Rivers Press (New York, NY), 1970.
The South Dakota Guidebook, New Rivers Press (New York, NY), 1974.
Harmony of the World (short stories), University of Missouri Press (Columbia, MO), 1984.
Through the Safety Net (short stories), Viking (New York, NY), 1985.
First Light (novel), Viking (New York, NY), 1987.
Imaginary Paintings and Other Poems, Paris Review Editions (Latham, NY), 1990.
A Relative Stranger (short stories), Norton (New York, NY), 1990.
Shadow Play (novel), Norton (New York, NY), 1993.
Believers (short stories and novella), Pantheon (New York, NY), 1997.
Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction, Graywolf Press (St. Paul, MN), 1997.

Author: Charles Baxter (2)

Writings: (continued)
(Editor) *The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting*, Graywolf Press (St. Paul, MN), 1999.
The Feast of Love (novel), Pantheon (New York, NY), 2000.
(Editor, with Peter Turchi) *Bringing the Devil to His Knees: The Craft of Fiction and the Writing Life*, University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI), 2001.
Saul and Patsy (novel), Pantheon (New York, NY), 2003.
(Editor, with Edward Hirsch and Michael Collier) *A William Maxwell Portrait: Memories and Appreciations*, Norton (New York, NY), 2004.

Poems have been featured in numerous anthologies, including *The Fifth Annual Best Science Fiction*, edited by Harry Harrison and Brian Aldiss, Putnam (New York, NY), 1972; *Toward Winter*, edited by Robert Bonazzi, New Rivers Press (New York, NY), 1972; *The Pushcart Prize Anthology XVI*, Pushcart Press (Wainscott, NY), 1991; and *Best American Short Stories*, 1982, 1986, 1987, 1989, and 1991. Contributor to periodicals, including *Minnesota Review*, *Kayak*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Antioch Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Georgia Review*, *New England Review*, *Centennial Review*, *New York Times*, and *Journal of Modern Literature*. Associate editor, *Minnesota Review*, 1967-69, and *Criticism*; editor of *Audit/Poetry*, 1973-74.

Baxter's works have been translated into Japanese, Swedish, German, Russian, Romanian, French, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, Portugese, and Chinese.

Sidelights:

Charles Baxter initially caught critics' attention with his poetry and criticism, but it is the graceful prose and human understanding of his short stories and novels that have gained him entry into the pantheon of leading American writers of the twentieth century. In the words of Chuck Wachtel in *Nation*, "Baxter is a remarkable storyteller" who, in each new book, "has offered his readers an increasingly significant, humane and populous reflection, one in which we keep finding things we have sensed the presence of but have not before seen." Another *Nation* critic, Theodore Solotaroff, noted that Baxter "has the special gift of capturing the shadow of genuine significance as it flits across the face of the ordinary." Baxter's sharply drawn, unique characters —one of his hallmarks—elicited praise from Jonathan Yardley in the *Washington Post Book World*: "Unlike so many other young American writers . . . Baxter cares about his people, recognizes the validity and dignity of their lives, grants them humor and individuality."

Born in Minnesota and a longtime resident of Michigan, Baxter has created a fictional world that embraces the Midwest. As a reviewer for *Ploughshares* explained, the author portrays "in luminous, precise language, solid Midwestern citizens, many of whom reside in the fictional town of Five Oaks, Michigan, whose orderly lives are disrupted, frequently by an accident or incident or a stranger." The reviewer added: "The limits of geography tend to elicit introspection, and when even a small calamity befalls Baxter's characters, they brood over surprisingly large issues of morality and theodicy, grappling with good and evil and the mysteriousness of existence."

Baxter's first volume of short stories, *Harmony of the World*, includes the award-winning title story as well as several others. *Harmony of the World*, originally published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, is about a young pianist who decides to become a newspaper critic after one of his performances elicits a particularly scathing review from a music teacher. His affair with a somewhat untalented singer and the events that bring both of their lives to a crisis are the means through which Baxter explores "the ache of yearning for perfection, in love and art, a perfection human beings can never attain, however close they come to apprehending it," to quote Laurence Goldstein in the *Ann Arbor News*. Goldstein praised Baxter for the "imaginative sympathy and marvelous craft" of his short stories, a view shared by Peter Ross of the *Detroit News:* "There are no weak spots

in *Harmony of the World*, no falterings of craft or insight. Baxter's influences are many and subtle, but his voice is his own and firmly in control. . . . *Harmony of the World* is a serious collection by a serious writer; it deserves as much attention, study and praise as anything being written today."

Baxter's second collection of short stories, *Through the Safety Net*, was published just one year after *Harmony of the World* and was received with great enthusiasm by critics. "It's a nice surprise that a second collection is so speedily upon us and that it improves on the first," wrote Ron Hansen in the *New York Times Book Review*. *Through the Safety Net* is an exploration of the inevitable perils of everyday life. Baxter's characters—among them an unsuccessful graduate student, a five-year-old boy trying to understand his grandmother's death, and a spurned lover who becomes obsessed with the object of his desire—spend their energies trying to escape pain and loss, but inevitably fail. In the title story, Diana visits a psychic only to be told that she is headed for a great calamity. "What kind? The Book of Job kind," the psychic tells her. "I saw your whole life, your house, car, that swimming pool you put in last summer, the career, your child, and the whole future just start to radiate with this ugly black flame from the inside, poof, and then I saw you falling, like at the circus, down from the trapeze. Whoops, and down, and then down through the safety net. Through the ground." In another narrative, a psychopath, lamenting his lack of fame, remarks: "If you are not famous in America, you are considered a mistake. They suspend you in negative air and give you bad jobs working in basements pushing mops from eight at night until four in the morning."

Yardley characterized the people in Baxter's stories as individuals without purpose, "amiably retreating from life's challenges . . . though the forms of their retreats and the motives for them vary." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer found the stories "flawed by a fondness for excessive detail, implausible turns and mere trickiness," but conceded that they contained "bright flashes of unmistakable talent." Baxter's careful attention to detail was praised by a *New York Times* critic: "An extraordinarily limber writer, Mr. Baxter makes his characters' fears palpable to the reader by slowly drawing us into their day-to-day routine and making us see things through their eyes." The stories in *Through the Safety Net*, concluded Hansen, are "intelligent, original, gracefully written, always moving, frequently funny and—that rarest of compliments—wise."

When Baxter's first novel, *First Light*, was published in 1987, it immediately garnered praise for its unique structure. Prefaced by a quote from Danish philosopher S'ren Kierkegaard—"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards"—the novel presents events in reverse chronological order. Thus, each chapter is a step further back into the past of the characters. At the outset of *First Light*, Hugh Welch and his sister Dorsey are uneasy adults reunited for a Fourth of July celebration. Their strained, distant relationship is clearly a source of anguish to them both. As the novel progresses, Hugh and Dorsey become younger and younger, and the many layers of their life-long bond are slowly uncovered. "We see their youth and childhoods revealed, like rapidly turning pages in a snapshot album," observed Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*. By the time the novel ends, Hugh is a young child being introduced to his newborn baby sister. "In reading of these events," Kakutani wrote, "we see why Dorsey and Hugh each made the choices they did, how their childhood dreams were translated into adult decisions." The combination of Baxter's unique narrative structure and fine characterization results in "a remarkably supple novel that gleams with the smoky chiaroscuro of familial love recalled through time," concluded Kakutani.

Although *First Light* was Baxter's first published novel, it was not his first attempt at the novel form. His first three novels, he remarked in the *New York Times*, are "apprentice" efforts he would never consider publishing. "I did take a brief episode out of one of them but, for the most part, I can't stand to look at them now, so I wouldn't want anyone else to." Describing the structure of *First Light*, he commented: "The technique resembles those little Russian dolls that fit into each other—you open them up and they keep getting smaller and smaller. What I am trying to say is that grownups don't stop being the people they were many years before, in childhood."

Author: Charles Baxter (4)

Baxter's 1990 collection of short stories, *A Relative Stranger*, features characters "constantly having odd encounters with strangers that disrupt their quiet, humdrum lives and send them skidding in unexpected new directions," Kakutani stated in a *New York Times* review. In one story, a man's attempt to help an insane, homeless man sparks the jealousy of his wife and son. In another, a woman who is secretly in love with her husband's best friend develops an irrational fear of burglars. Describing the couple's suburban home as one of many "little rectangular temples of light," the friend scoffs at the wife's fear. "Nothing here but families and fireplaces and Duraflame logs and children of God," he tells the husband. "Not the sort of place," he continues, "where a married woman ought to be worried about prowlers."

Recommending *A Relative Stranger* in *Nation*, Theodore Solotaroff commented: "Baxter is well on his way to becoming the next master of the short story." *A Relative Stranger* was also praised by Kakutani: "All the stories in this collection attest to Mr. Baxter's ability to orchestrate the details of mundane day-to-day reality into surprising patterns of grace and revelation, his gentle but persuasive knack for finding and describing the fleeting moments that indelibly define a life....We finish the book with the satisfaction of having been immersed in a beautifully rendered and fully imagined world."

Baxter's 1993 novel, *Shadow Play*, revolves around Wyatt Palmer, a man whose chaotic childhood has left him unable to deal with emotions. Instead, he focuses on maintaining a neatly ordered life with his understanding wife and two children. Wyatt's job as an assistant city manager leads him to cross paths with a former high school classmate interested in starting a chemical company in their economically depressed hometown. The former classmate, Jerry Schwartzwalder, asks Wyatt to bend the rules in order to help him launch his new company. In exchange for his cooperation, Jerry offers Wyatt's unstable foster brother, Cyril, a job at the plant. When Cyril shows signs of a fatal disease caused by exposure to toxins, Wyatt becomes enraged and vows to take revenge. According to *New York Times Book Review* contributor Lorrie Moore, *Shadow Play* is reminiscent of "*The Lottery*," by Shirley Jackson. Like Jackson's story, Baxter's novel "takes large themes of good and evil and primitive deal making, and situates them in municipal terms and local ritual. He is interested in those shadowy corners of civilization in which barbarity manages to nestle and thrive. The America of this book has become a kind of hell." Or, as Winston Groom, the author of *Forrest Gump,* put it in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, "Baxter has created a scenario in which alienation and anxiety are the norm, a kind of dubious universe where people are neither good nor evil but instead are driven by 20th-century pragmatism into a twilight zone of utter practicality."

In unfolding Wyatt's story of conflict in small-town America, Baxter brings to bear many of his talents as a storyteller. "To convey this sense of abandonment and emptiness without losing the reader is not easy," observed R. Z. Sheppard in *Time*. "*Shadow Play* could have turned into another clever existential dead end. But Baxter fills the void with a hundred human touches, a style as intimate as chamber music, and a hero who rouses himself to reject the banality that hoohah happens." A *Publishers Weekly* critic also drew a musical analogy to describe Baxter's command of style. The story of how Wyatt deals with his emotional handicaps is told in "language so carefully honed it sings." The reviewer continued that the author's "metaphors and apercus are striking and luminous, and several scenes—notably Wyatt and Cyril's final bonding—are unforgettable." Baxter's achievement, in the opinion of Lorrie Moore, is that "he has steadily taken beautiful and precise language and gone into the ordinary and secret places of people—their moral and emotional quandaries, their typically American circumstances, their burning intelligence, their negotiations with what is tapped, stunted, violent, sustaining, decent or miraculous in their lives."

Jane Smiley, writing in *Chicago's Tribune Books*, conceded the eloquence of Baxter's writing and the wisdom of his observations, but she found "Wyatt himself is something of a cipher, a blank at the center whose moral odyssey is less than compelling....The very vividness" of the fictional characters' "eccentricities finally limits the broader appeal of their situation." Moore drew a different conclusion. She maintained that "one of Mr. Baxter's great strengths as a writer has always been his ability to capture the stranded inner lives of the Middle West's

repressed eccentrics. And here, in his second novel, he is full throttle." For a contributor to the *Yale Review*, the situations represented in *Shadow Play* achieve broad appeal because they demonstrate that Baxter "has a feeling for nuance, for what's being said and not said, for the complexities of social class and social privilege, for the resonance of personal history, for how much we are the authors—and the products—of our experience." The reviewer continued: "He's not only generous to his characters, but compassionate, endlessly patient, and tolerant of their human frailties and flaws." Richard Locke concluded in the *Wall Street Journal*, "After a decade of so much play-it-safe fiction of photorealistic gloom, it's a pleasure to encounter a novel in the great tradition of American moral realism touched by shards of gnostic faith and glints of transcendental light."

While some reviewers hailed *Shadow Play* as the book that would thrust Baxter into the national literary limelight, Baxter himself refused to set such high expectations. "When *First Light* came out, I was full of the American Dream," he recalled in the *Detroit News.* "I thought the birds of money were going to land in a huge flock on the roof, and I'd be proclaimed from housetop to housetop. It was foolish, and that's what young writers are....I'm trying not to get my hopes up. I worked on [*Shadow Play*] so long, I just want it to do well. I just want people to like it and to find it interesting and find it has some meaning to their lives."

Baxter published another collection of short stories, with a novella, in 1997. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer described *Believers* as "ambitious and accomplished," adding that "the shorter works here tackle slippery themes and subjects—fleeting moments of truth; the ambiguities of daily life and the defenses through which ordinary men and women attempt to clarify them." These stories are "Michigan stories," commented Frederick Busch in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. "They occur in the lives of those with intelligence, leisure in which to use it, walls behind which they may retreat and time enough for contemplation." "The book's self-scrutinizers," Busch added, "those who believe and those who cannot...are the middle class in the middle of the nation." Like Baxter's readers, they often experience "failures of will, of nerve, of ethics, of feeling," Busch suggested. "But...they are like us in that their souls do not only sink: They strive to climb."

Believers "will remind us that [Baxter] is an exemplary writer because he works in persuasive solidities, in what is actual," concluded Busch. Chuck Wachtel offered greater praise in his *Nation* review. "Rarely...have I been stopped by what I read and moved so deeply as I was in the novella and stories that make up *Believers*. Baxter, a master craftsman, knows that craft is more than something to be good at."

Baxter's *National Book Award*-nominated *The Feast of Love* begins with a character—named Charles Baxter—whose chronic insomnia leads him to a deserted park bench in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It is there that the fictional Baxter encounters a neighbor named Bradley who offers his own life story of two marriages—and two divorces—as grist for a new novel. After initial resistance, Baxter delves into Bradley's past and present, where each of his former wives, as well as his coworkers, help to enlarge the emerging group portrait. "*The Feast of Love* is as precise, as empathetic, as luminous as any of Baxter's past work," declared Jacqueline Carey in the *New York Times Book Review*. "It is also rich, juicy, laugh-out-loud funny and completely engrossing." A *Publishers Weekly* critic felt that Baxter's particular gift in the novel "is to catch the exact pitch of a dozen voices in an astutely observed group of contemporary men and women." Carey also noted the old-fashioned sense of community underlying the work. "In *The Feast of Love*, Charles Baxter shows us the hard-won generosity of spirit that day-to-day dealings with other human beings require," she stated. "He builds a community right on the page before us, using a glittering eye, a silvery tongue—and just a little moonlight."

Similar to *The Feast of Love*, *Saul and Patsy* focuses on married life in the Midwest, in this case on a newlywed couple who settle in a small town and find themselves moth-balled in their comfortable, middle-class neighborhood. At least Saul, the Jewish, former city-dwelling husband, feels stifled, "shipwrecked in the plainspoken, poker-faced Midwest," explained *Atlantic* contributor James Marcus, although the critic was quick to add that the novel is also "a valentine to the Midwest, whose terrain the author describes with almost luminarist ardor." Calling Baxter "a master of the distributed plot, the deceptively looping situation that discloses

Author: Charles Baxter (6)

its tensions gradually," *Book* critic Sven Birkerts praised the novel's depiction of the "inevitably mine-studded marital terrain" traversed by his transplanted couple as they negotiate the role of outsider. Praising Baxter's characters, which include a troubled, obsessive teen, and a plot that rises to a tense and tragic denouement, *Booklist* reviewer Donna Seaman dubbed Baxter's protagonists "magnetic, his humor incisive, his decipherment of the human psyche felicitous, and his command of the storyteller's magic absolute."

In addition to authoring fiction, Baxter has also served as editor of anthologies which focus on various aspects of the writing process. *The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting*, for instance, explores the art of memoir and the process by which artists of all sorts recover and interpret memories. In *Library Journal*, Julia Burch wrote of the work: "These are self-conscious and beautifully written essays that deftly explore the act of memoir-making and the art of storytelling." A *Publishers Weekly* correspondent likewise found the essays "often engaging and occasionally quite inspired."

In both his short stories and novels, Baxter's exploration of his characters' inner desires and outward realities has struck a chord in critics and readers alike. "If there is a consistent theme in Baxter's work, it is the difficulty people have in accommodating themselves to a world that is complex, mysterious, and demanding, that offers rewards that glitter all the more brightly because so few attain them," Yardley summarized in the *Washington Post Book World*. "Whether he's writing about an overly self-conscious intellectual or an inarticulate street person," concluded Kakutani, "Mr. Baxter is able to map out their emotions persuasively and delineate the shape of their spiritual confusion." Praising the fluid beauty of the author's style, John Saari wrote in the *Antioch Review*: "Many writers today feel no depth of compassion for their characters. Baxter, in contrast, is adept at portraying his characters as human beings, even when some of them are not the best examples."

A self-described insomniac, Baxter also admitted in *Ploughshares* that he likes a routine and will sometimes fixate on even the slightest intrusions or variations from his schedule. Noting that he is "conscious of pattern-making" in his day-to-day life, the author added: "I think if you are somewhat compulsive or habitual in your ordinary life, it gives you some latitude to be wild in your creative work."

Further Readings:

Books:

Baxter, Charles, *Through the Safety Net*, Viking (New York, NY), 1985.
Baxter, Charles, *A Relative Stranger*, Norton (New York, NY), 1990.
Contemporary Literary Criticism, Gale (Detroit, MI), Volume 45, 1987, Volume 78, 1993.
Contemporary Popular Writers, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1997.
Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 130: American Short-Story Writers since World War II, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1993.

Periodicals:

Ann Arbor News, May 16, 1982.
Antioch Review, fall, 1985, p. 498; summer, 1993, p. 465.
Atlantic, September, 2003, James Marcus, review of *Saul and Patsy*, p. 152.
Book, September-October, 2003, Sven Birkerts, review of *Saul and Patsy*, p. 74.
Booklist, April 15, 2000, Grace Fill, review of *The Feast of Love*, p. 1522; August, 2003, Donna Seaman, review of *Saul and Patsy*, p. 1924.
Detroit Free Press, December 23, 1992.
Detroit News, May 20, 1984; December 28, 1992, p. 1D.

Author: Charles Baxter (7)

Entertainment Weekly, September 12, 2003, Thom Geier, review of *Saul and Patsy*, p. 156.
Hudson Review, spring, 1991, p. 133.
Kirkus Reviews, July 1, 2003, review of *Saul and Patsy*, p. 869.
Library Journal, April 15, 1990, p. 96; December, 1992, p. 184; September 15, 1993, p. 136; May 1, 1999, Julia Burch, review of *The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting*, p. 76; September 1, 2003, David W. Henderson, review of *Saul and Patsy*, p. 204.
Los Angeles Times Book Review, July 6, 1986, p. 10; December 6, 1987, p. 3; September 29, 1991; March 21, 1993, p. 5; March 30, 1997, p. 10.
Nation, December 30, 1991, p. 862; April 7, 1997, p. 33.
New England Review, summer, 1992, p. 234.
New York Times, June 26, 1985; August 24, 1987; September 7, 1987; September 4, 1990; September 29, 1991.
New York Times Book Review, August 25, 1985, p. 1; October 4, 1987, p. 18; October 23, 1988, p. 60; October 21, 1990, p. 18; February 14, 1993, p. 7; May 7, 2000, Jacqueline Carey, "The Ex Files."
People, February 1, 1993, p. 22; February 24, 1997, p. 65.
Ploughshares, fall, 1999, Don Lee, "About Charles Baxter: A Profile."
Publishers Weekly, May 24, 1985; October 19, 1992, p. 57; December 7, 1992, p. 45; February 24, 1997, p. 65; March 29, 1999, review of *The Business of Memory: The Art of Remembering in an Age of Forgetting*, p. 76; March 6, 2000, review of *The Feast of Love*, p. 79; July 28, 2003, review of *Saul and Patsy*, p. 76.
Southern Review, April, 1991, p. 465.
Time, September 7, 1987, p. 81; September 14, 1987; January 25, 1993, p. 70.
Tribune Books (Chicago, IL), January 17, 1993, p. 4.
Wall Street Journal, February 5, 1993, p. A9.
Washington Post Book World, July 10, 1985; January 17, 1993, p. 3.
Yale Review, July, 1993, p. 122.

Source:† Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2004.
Source Database:† Contemporary Authors

Reviews:

Booklist Review*:*
Late one midsummer night, insomniac Charlie roams his neighborhood near the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He encounters his neighbor Bradley out walking his dog, also named Bradley. Bradley insists that Charlie's latest book should consist of people's stories, actual people who have stories and need somebody to listen. "Everybody's got a story, and we'll just start telling you the stories we have." And so the book (within the book), a collection of raucous and entertaining stories, begins with Bradley's tale of a nearly perfect day with his former wife Kathryn, who found her fulfillment not with Bradley but with a shortstop on the women's softball team. Kathryn tells her story, as does Bradley's second wife, Diana, who left him to go back to her once-secret lover, David. For Cloe and Oscar, teenage employees at Bradley's coffee shop, there seems to be only boundless, energetic, transforming love for each other. Baxter, author of six previous works of fiction, does a great job writing in the voices of both genders and various ages. ((Reviewed April 15, 2000)) — Grace Fill

Publishers Weekly Review:
Baxter (*First Light*, *Harmony of the World*, *Believers*) has for too long been a writer's writer whose books have enjoyed more admirers than sales. Pantheon appears confident that his new novel can be his breakout work. It certainly deserves to be. In a buoyant, eloquent and touching narrative, Baxter breaks rules blithely as he goes along, and the reader's only possible response is to realize how absurd rules can be. Baxter begins, for example, as himself, the author, waking in the middle of the night and going out onto the predawn streets of Ann Arbor (where Baxter in fact lives). Meeting a neighbor, Bradley Smith, with his dog, also called Bradley, he is told the first of the spellbinding stories of love—erotic, wistful, anxious, settled, ecstatic and perverse—that make up the book, woven seamlessly together so they form a virtuosic ensemble performance. The small cast includes Bradley, who runs the local coffee shop called Jitters; Diana, a tough-minded lawyer and customer he unwisely marries after the breakup of his first marriage to dog-phobic Kathryn; Diana's dangerous lover, David; Chloe and Oscar, two much-pierced punksters who are also Jitters people and who enjoy the kind of sensual passion older people warn will never last, but that for them lasts beyond the grave; Oscar's evil and lustful dad; philosophy professor Ginsberg, who pines for his missing and beloved son, Aaron; and Margaret, the black emergency room doctor with whom Bradley eventually finds a kind of peace. The action takes place over an extended period, but such is the magic of Baxter's telling that it seems to be occurring in the author's mind on that one heady midsummer night. His special gift is to catch the exact pitch of a dozen voices in an astutely observed group of contemporary men and women, yet retain an authorial presence capable of the most exquisite shadings of emotion and passion, longing and regret. Some magical things seem to happen, even in Ann Arbor, but the true magic in this luminous book is the seemingly effortless ebb and flow of the author's clear-sighted yet deeply poetic vision. 30,000 first printing; 10-city author tour. (May) Copyright 2000 *Cahners Business Information*.

Kirkus Review:
The different longings people subsume within the actions of loving others are explored with wry affection: an extremely likable third novel from the celebrated author (*Believers*, 1997; *Shadow Play*, 1993, etc.) It consists of stories told to author Charles Baxter by several of his mutually involved neighbors, beginning when "Charlie," strolling his hometown's nearly deserted streets on an insomniac midsummer night, sneaks into Michigan Stadium and observes a young couple making love on the football field's 50-yard line, then meets his neighbor Bradley Smith, who (not entirely credibly) pours out the tale of losing his wife Kathryn to another woman. The scope steadily expands, as we become acquainted with Kathryn's version of her marriage's failure, Bradley's dog (also named Bradley, rather Anne Taylor, touch); then, in roughly this order, teenaged Chloè… (who waitresses at the coffee shop Bradley runs) and her "reformed boy outlaw" sweetheart Oscar; Bradley's next-door neighbor Harry Ginsberg, a doggedly idealistic philosophy professor whose familial happiness is threatened by the anger

Reviews: (continued)

of his estranged son; Bradley's new wife Diana (who continues her affair with her married lover David); and, yes, others. *The Feast of Love* achieves an eccentric, fascinating rhythm about halfway through, when its characters' now-established individual stories begin bouncing off one another intriguingly. The novel is quite skillfully (if unconventionally) plotted, and grips the reader's emotions surely as Baxter connects its distinctive dots during some absorbing climactic actions, when the genuine love between Chloè… and Oscar (two wonderfully realized characters) takes on an unexpected maturity and gravity.

Just a shade too warm and fuzzy to be fully successful, but awfully entertaining nevertheless. And the Joycean monologue (spoken by Chloè…) and graceful acknowledgement of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with which Baxter ends this rueful tale of romantic folly, are the perfect touches.

(*Kirkus Review*, April 1, 2000)

Random House Guide

Spotlight on:
The Feast of Love

About this Guide:

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Charles Baxter's *The Feast of Love*. While this extraordinary novel takes on literature's great themes—love, death, and life's bewildering mixture of pain and happiness—it does so in a disarmingly simple way. As every character tells his or her own story, Baxter weaves each sharply distinctive voice into a chorus that is unforgettable in its comedy, wit, and profundity, as well as in the sheer reading pleasure that it offers.

Charlie Baxter, frustrated with his stalled book-in-progress, goes out for a midnight stroll and runs into a friend named Bradley Smith. Bradley tells Charlie to call his book *The Feast of Love*. He says, "You should put me in your novel. I'm an expert on love. I've just broken up with my second wife, after all. I'm in an emotional tangle. Maybe I'd shoot myself before the final chapter" [p. 12]. Bradley has an idea for Charlie: he'll send people he knows to talk to Charlie, and Charlie can use their stories in his book.

We hear from Bradley's first wife, Kathryn, who never understood what Bradley was about, and shortly after their marriage left him for a woman named Jenny. Then there's Bradley's second wife, Diana—who marries him even though she is passionately involved with David, a married man with two children. There's Chloè, who works in Bradley's coffee shop, Jitters, and is wildly in love with Oscar, a young recovered drug addict. And there's Bradley's next-door neighbor Harry Ginsberg, a grief-stricken professor of philosophy whose youngest son is violently insane. Eventually all of these voices and stories converge to create a truly absorbing fictional world that transports the reader into the streets of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and into the lives of these characters.

When asked about how he came up with the idea for *The Feast of Love*, Charles Baxter replied, "I began by using my own insomnia, and a nighttime walk I took once down to the vacant lot at the corner of our street. I heard voices coming from someone's house, and I thought of that line from Shakespeare, 'The night air is full of voices,' and I thought: I'll write a novel with voices, a sort of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in which people are paired off with the wrong partners at first and then are paired off with the right partners later, and everyone will tell their stories to Charlie, who will be this shadowy listener, like the reader."* *The Feast of Love*, like A Midsummer Night's Dream, is a delightful immersion in the visions and dreams of a group of love-struck characters, a journey in which some of those dreams come true.

*†Author interview

Discussion Questions:

1. As the book opens, the character Charles Baxter leaves his house for a walk in the middle of the night. As he passes an antique mirror at the foot of the stairs, he describes the mirror as "glimmerless," a word he has used to describe himself [p. 4]. What does he mean by this? At the end of the novel, as dawn arrives, he tells us that "all the voices have died out in my head. I've been emptied out....My glimmerlessness has abated, it seems, at least for the moment" [p. 307]. What is the real Charles Baxter suggesting about the role of the author in *The Feast of Love*?

2. Does Baxter's decision to give the job of narration over to the characters themselves create a stronger sense of realism in the novel? Does it offer a greater possibility for revelation from the characters? What is the effect of this narrative technique on the reading experience?

Random Group Guide (2)

Spotlight on:
The Feast of Love

3. Does Bradley become more interesting as the novel unfolds? Kathryn says of him, "He turned himself into the greatest abstraction" [p. 34]. His neighbor Harry Ginsberg says, "He seemed to be living far down inside himself, perhaps in a secret passageway connected to his heart" [p. 75], while Diana says, "What a midwesterner he was, a thoroughly unhip guy with his heart in the usual place, on the sleeve, in plain sight. He was uninteresting and genuine, sweet-tempered and dependable, the sort of man who will stabilize your pulse rather than make it race" [p. 140]. Which, if any, of these insights is closest to the truth?

4. The novel takes its title from a beautiful, light-filled painting that Bradley has made and hidden in his basement. When Esther Ginsberg asks him why there are no people in the painting, Bradley answers, "Because...no one's ever allowed to go there. You can see it but you can't reach it" [p. 81]. Does the fact that Bradley has been able to paint such a powerful image suggest that he is closer to attaining it than he thinks?

5. Why does Chloè go to see Mrs. Maggaroulian, the psychic? Is the fortune-teller's presence in the novel related to Harry Ginsberg's belief that "the unexpected is always upon us" [pp. 290, 302]? How might this belief change the way one chooses to live?

6. What are Diana's motivations for marrying Bradley? Does her reasoning process [p. 138] seem plausible, or is it the result of desperation and self-deception? Is Diana, at the outset, the least likable character in the novel? How does she manage to work her way into the reader's affections?

7. Bradley is a person who baffles himself. He says, "I need a detective who could snoop around in my life and then tell me the solution to the mystery that I have yet to define, and the crime that created it" [p. 106]. Why, if his first wife Kathryn has a profound fear of dogs, does he take her to visit a dog pound? Why, if his second wife Diana is afraid of open spaces, does he take her to the wide skies and watery horizons of Michigan's Upper Peninsula? Why does he often act in ways that will compromise his happiness? Is Bradley like most people in this unfortunate tendency?

8. The characters often define themselves in strikingly economical statements. For instance, Diana says, "I lack usable tenderness and I don't have a shred of kindness, but I'm not a villain and never have been" [p. 258]; and Bradley says, "My inner life lacks dignity" [p. 58]. Do the characters in this novel display an unusual degree of insight and self-knowledge? Are some more perceptive about themselves than others?

9. In his description of the shopping mall in which Jitters is located, Bradley remarks, "The ion content in the oxygen has been tampered with by people trying to save money by giving you less oxygen to breathe. You get light-headed and desperate to shop....Don't get me wrong: I believe in business and profit" [p. 110]. In what ways is Bradley not a typical businessman? How does Jitters differ from a cafè such as Starbucks? What observations does the novel make about America's consumer-driven culture?

10. Throughout literature (for example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*), the traditional boy-meets-girl plot is complicated by the presence of a father or parents who refuse to sanction the union of the lovers. Can Oscar's father be seen in this traditional role—as a potential threat to the happiness of Chloè and Oscar? Or does he represent something far more threatening and evil? What is his effect on the latter part of the novel?

11. Harry Ginsberg tells Bradley about a poem his mother used to recite, about a dragon with a rubber nose. "This dragon would erase all the signs in town at night. During the day, no one would know where to go or what to buy. No signs anywhere. Posters gone, information gone....A world without signs of any kind....

Very curious. I often think about that poem" [p. 88]. Bradley takes up the idea, and begins to draw pictures of the dragon. How does the parable of the dragon resonate with some of the larger questions and ideas in the novel?

12. Speaking of Oscar, Chloè says, "Words violate him. And me, Chloè, I'm even more that way. There's almost no point in me saying anything about myself because the words will all be inhuman and brutally inaccurate. So no matter what I say, there's no profit in it" [p. 63]. Does Chloè underestimate her own talent for self-expression? Do her sections of the narrative belie her opinion about the uselessness of words?

13. How would you characterize Chloè's unique brand of intelligence? What are her strengths as a person? Is it likely that she will survive the loss of Oscar, and the challenge of single parenting, without any diminishment of her spirit?

14. Chloè believes that she once saw Jesus at a party; she also believes in karma and similar forms of spiritual justice. Harry Ginsberg, a scholar of the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, remarks, "The problem with love and God...is how to say anything about them that doesn't annihilate them instantly with wrong words, with untruth....We feel both, but because we cannot speak clearly about them, we end up—wordless, inarticulate —by denying their existence altogether, and pfffffft, they die" [p. 77]. Why do questions of spirituality and the meaning of human existence play such a major role in *The Feast of Love*?

15. In *The Feast of Love*, is sex an accurate gauge of the state of two people's emotional relationship to each other? If sex is an expression of Chloè and Oscar's joy in each other, does it make sense that they attempt to use it to make some sorely needed money? Is it puritanical to assume that they are making a mistake? Why are they ill suited for the pornography business?

16. Based on what happens in *The Feast of Love*, would you assume that the author believes that love is necessary for happiness? Although they begin the novel mismatched, Bradley, Kathryn, and Diana eventually all find themselves with the partners they truly desire. Is it surprising that the novel offers so many happy endings? How does the tragedy of Oscar's death fit in with the better fortunes of the other characters? Why has Baxter chosen to quote Prokofiev [p. 237] to open the section called "Ends"?

Suggestions for Further Reading

A. S. Byatt, *The Matisse Stories*
Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*
Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*
William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*
Richard Ford, *Independence Day*
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities*
Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*
S'ren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*
Lorrie Moore, *Birds of America*
Alice Munro, *Open Secrets*
Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, *Lost in the Cosmos*
William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*